

Friday, April 02, 2004

Clarke was right to apologize. He *had* failed the victims, their families, and the country. As had his colleagues and their bosses, and the President. They all owed apologies. And not only they. As Condoleezza Rice pointed out to Newsweek, "Let's remember who was really responsible... Osama Bin Laden." To the extent that Osama Bin Laden had a responsibility to protect the American people from international terrorists, he certainly failed in that, and owes an apology. Seriously though...

They all failed. Many died. Had they done all that they reasonably could, and should, to avert this catastrophe? Clarke, who was in charge of this under the President and Rice, doesn't claim that he did; and he makes overwhelmingly clear that his superiors did not, that in fact they reacted to warnings and recommendations in a way that was culpably, inexcusably negligent. Which is not to say that if they had given it their full attention and effort, they could even with high likelihood have prevented 9-11. It was probably too far along by that time for new programs to prevent it, without considerable luck. By acknowledging that, Clarke makes clear that failures in the Clinton Administration programs—in which Clarke was also implicated—were also critical to 9-11. But what about the prospect of future terrorist acts, after September 11, 2001? It seems unmistakable from Clarke's account that the Bush Administration has been far more negligent in acting to prevent these than the Clinton Administration was in moving to avert 9-11.

And that applies not only to the first nine months of the Administration but to the entire period since 9-11. Indeed, Clarke's second main theme (after the lowering of the priority of the effort against terrorism in the first nine months, compared to the preceding Administration—indeed, total non-involvement in the issue by the President, Rice, Rumsfeld and Cheney) is that when the White House and DOD finally turned their attention to the threat of terrorism, their main response was not just inappropriate and distracting of resources and attention, it was dangerously counter-productive, making the problem of future terrorism *much worse* and harder to handle. Thus, the Administration ;failed first to act responsibly to protect American citizens, then it proceeded greatly to increase the danger to them.

Was there something Clarke himself could have done to lessen this danger? Yes. He could have acted along the lines he is doing now, with much the same message, but doing it two years earlier, before the Iraq war, with the aim of possibly averting that war. He saw it then, with great expert authority, as likely not only to be unhelpful and a costly distraction from the fight against terror but to play into the hands of Osama bin Laden, to strengthen Al Qaeda as almost nothing else could do, and thus to cost many American lives all over the world and at home.

This was the judgment not only of Clarke but of his comparably qualified successor as counterterrorism chief on the NSC, his friend Randy Beers, who turned to him with the news that he was quitting his job precisely because of this prospect. (Clarke's immediate replacement,

defense is as madly optimistic about the prospects for fast, cheap military success there as he was in Iraq.

Even more ominously, Philip Giraldi, a former CIA official, reported in *The American Conservative* a year ago that Vice President Cheney's office had directed contingency planning for "a large-scale air assault on Iran employing both conventional and tactical nuclear weapons" and that "several senior Air Force officers" involved in the planning were "appalled at the implications of what they are doing—that Iran is being set up for an unprovoked nuclear attack—but no one is prepared to damage his career by posing any objection."

Several of Hersh's sources have confirmed both the detailed operational planning for use of nuclear weapons against deep underground Iranian installations and military resistance to this prospect, which led several senior officials to consider resigning. Hersh notes that opposition by the Joint Chiefs in April led to White House withdrawal of the "nuclear option"—for now, I would say. The operational plans remain in existence, to be drawn upon for a "decisive" blow if the president deems it necessary.

Many of these sources regard the planned massive air attack—with or without nuclear weapons—as almost sure to be catastrophic for the Middle East, the position of the United States in the world, our troops in Iraq, the world economy, and U.S. domestic security. Thus they are as deeply concerned about these prospects as many other insiders were in the year before the Iraq invasion. That is why, unlike in the lead-up to Vietnam or Iraq, some insiders are leaking to reporters. But since these disclosures—so far without documents and without attribution—have not evidently had enough credibility to raise public alarm, the question is whether such officials have yet reached the limit of their responsibilities to our country.

Assuming Hersh's so-far anonymous sources mean what they say—that this is, as one puts it, "a juggernaut that has to be stopped"—I believe it is time for one or more of them to go beyond fragmentary leaks unaccompanied by documents. That means doing what no other active official or consultant has ever done in a timely way: what neither Richard Clarke nor I nor anyone else thought of doing until we were no longer officials, no longer had access to current documents, after bombs had fallen and thousands had died, years into a war. It means going outside executive channels, as officials with contemporary access, to expose the president's lies and oppose his war policy publicly before the war, with unequivocal evidence from inside.

Simply resigning in silence does not meet moral or political responsibilities of officials rightly "appalled" by the thrust of secret policy. I hope that one or more



such persons will make the sober decision—accepting sacrifice of clearance and career, and risk of prison—to disclose comprehensive files that convey, irrefutably, official, secret estimates of costs and prospects and dangers of the military plans being considered. What needs disclosure is the full internal controversy, the secret critiques as well as the arguments and claims of advocates of war and nuclear “options”—the Pentagon Papers of the Middle East. But unlike in 1971, the ongoing secret debate should be made available before our war in the region expands to include Iran, before the sixty-one-year moratorium on nuclear war is ended violently, to give our democracy a chance to foreclose either of those catastrophes.

The personal risks of doing this are very great. Yet they are not as great as the risks of bodies and lives we are asking daily of over 130,000 young Americans—with many yet to join them—in an unjust war. Our country has urgent need for comparable courage, moral and civil courage, from its public servants. They owe us the truth before the next war begins.